A Modest Proposal for preventing the children of poor people in  
Ireland, from being a burden on their parents or country, and for  
making them beneficial to the publick.  
  
by Dr. Jonathan Swift. 1729  
  
It is a melancholy object to those, who walk through this great  
town, or travel in the country, when they see the streets, the  
roads and cabbin-doors crowded with beggars of the female sex,  
followed by three, four, or six children, all in rags, and  
importuning every passenger for an alms. These mothers instead of  
being able to work for their honest livelihood, are forced to  
employ all their time in stroling to beg sustenance for their  
helpless infants who, as they grow up, either turn thieves for  
want of work, or leave their dear native country, to fight for  
the Pretender in Spain, or sell themselves to the Barbadoes.  
  
I think it is agreed by all parties, that this prodigious number  
of children in the arms, or on the backs, or at the heels of  
their mothers, and frequently of their fathers, is in the present  
deplorable state of the kingdom, a very great additional  
grievance; and therefore whoever could find out a fair, cheap and  
easy method of making these children sound and useful members of  
the common-wealth, would deserve so well of the publick, as to  
have his statue set up for a preserver of the nation.  
  
But my intention is very far from being confined to provide only  
for the children of professed beggars: it is of a much greater  
extent, and shall take in the whole number of infants at a  
certain age, who are born of parents in effect as little able to  
support them, as those who demand our charity in the streets.  
  
As to my own part, having turned my thoughts for many years, upon  
this important subject, and maturely weighed the several schemes  
of our projectors, I have always found them grossly mistaken in  
their computation. It is true, a child just dropt from its dam,  
may be supported by her milk, for a solar year, with little other  
nourishment: at most not above the value of two shillings, which  
the mother may certainly get, or the value in scraps, by her  
lawful occupation of begging; and it is exactly at one year old  
that I propose to provide for them in such a manner, as, instead  
of being a charge upon their parents, or the parish, or wanting  
food and raiment for the rest of their lives, they shall, on the  
contrary, contribute to the feeding, and partly to the cloathing  
of many thousands.  
  
There is likewise another great advantage in my scheme, that it  
will prevent those voluntary abortions, and that horrid practice  
of women murdering their bastard children, alas! too frequent  
among us, sacrificing the poor innocent babes, I doubt, more to  
avoid the expence than the shame, which would move tears and pity  
in the most savage and inhuman breast.  
  
The number of souls in this kingdom being usually reckoned one  
million and a half, of these I calculate there may be about two  
hundred thousand couple whose wives are breeders; from which  
number I subtract thirty thousand couple, who are able to  
maintain their own children, (although I apprehend there cannot  
be so many, under the present distresses of the kingdom) but this  
being granted, there will remain an hundred and seventy thousand  
breeders. I again subtract fifty thousand, for those women who  
miscarry, or whose children die by accident or disease within the  
year. There only remain an hundred and twenty thousand children  
of poor parents annually born. The question therefore is, How  
this number shall be reared, and provided for? which, as I have  
already said, under the present situation of affairs, is utterly  
impossible by all the methods hitherto proposed. For we can  
neither employ them in handicraft or agriculture; we neither  
build houses, (I mean in the country) nor cultivate land: they  
can very seldom pick up a livelihood by stealing till they arrive  
at six years old; except where they are of towardly parts,  
although I confess they learn the rudiments much earlier; during  
which time they can however be properly looked upon only as  
probationers: As I have been informed by a principal gentleman in  
the county of Cavan, who protested to me, that he never knew  
above one or two instances under the age of six, even in a part  
of the kingdom so renowned for the quickest proficiency in that  
art.  
  
I am assured by our merchants, that a boy or a girl before twelve  
years old, is no saleable commodity, and even when they come to  
this age, they will not yield above three pounds, or three pounds  
and half a crown at most, on the exchange; which cannot turn to  
account either to the parents or kingdom, the charge of  
nutriments and rags having been at least four times that value.  
  
I shall now therefore humbly propose my own thoughts, which I  
hope will not be liable to the least objection.  
  
I have been assured by a very knowing American of my acquaintance  
in London, that a young healthy child well nursed, is, at a year  
old, a most delicious nourishing and wholesome food, whether  
stewed, roasted, baked, or boiled; and I make no doubt that it  
will equally serve in a fricasie, or a ragoust.  
  
I do therefore humbly offer it to publick consideration, that of  
the hundred and twenty thousand children, already computed,  
twenty thousand may be reserved for breed, whereof only one  
fourth part to be males; which is more than we allow to sheep,  
black cattle, or swine, and my reason is, that these children are  
seldom the fruits of marriage, a circumstance not much regarded  
by our savages, therefore, one male will be sufficient to serve  
four females. That the remaining hundred thousand may, at a year  
old, be offered in sale to the persons of quality and fortune,  
through the kingdom, always advising the mother to let them suck  
plentifully in the last month, so as to render them plump, and  
fat for a good table. A child will make two dishes at an  
entertainment for friends, and when the family dines alone, the  
fore or hind quarter will make a reasonable dish, and seasoned  
with a little pepper or salt, will be very good boiled on the  
fourth day, especially in winter.  
  
I have reckoned upon a medium, that a child just born will weigh  
12 pounds, and in a solar year, if tolerably nursed, encreaseth  
to 28 pounds.  
  
I grant this food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very  
proper for landlords, who, as they have already devoured most of  
the parents, seem to have the best title to the children.  
  
Infant's flesh will be in season throughout the year, but more  
plentiful in March, and a little before and after; for we are  
told by a grave author, an eminent French physician, that fish  
being a prolifick dyet, there are more children born in Roman  
Catholick countries about nine months after Lent, the markets  
will be more glutted than usual, because the number of Popish  
infants, is at least three to one in this kingdom, and therefore  
it will have one other collateral advantage, by lessening the  
number of Papists among us.  
  
I have already computed the charge of nursing a beggar's child  
(in which list I reckon all cottagers, labourers, and four-fifths  
of the farmers) to be about two shillings per annum, rags  
included; and I believe no gentleman would repine to give ten  
shillings for the carcass of a good fat child, which, as I have  
said, will make four dishes of excellent nutritive meat, when he  
hath only some particular friend, or his own family to dine with  
him. Thus the squire will learn to be a good landlord, and grow  
popular among his tenants, the mother will have eight shillings  
neat profit, and be fit for work till she produces another child.  
  
Those who are more thrifty (as I must confess the times require)  
may flea the carcass; the skin of which, artificially dressed,  
will make admirable gloves for ladies, and summer boots for fine  
gentlemen.  
  
As to our City of Dublin, shambles may be appointed for this  
purpose, in the most convenient parts of it, and butchers we may  
be assured will not be wanting; although I rather recommend  
buying the children alive, and dressing them hot from the knife,  
as we do roasting pigs.  
  
A very worthy person, a true lover of his country, and whose  
virtues I highly esteem, was lately pleased, in discoursing on  
this matter, to offer a refinement upon my scheme. He said, that  
many gentlemen of this kingdom, having of late destroyed their  
deer, he conceived that the want of venison might be well  
supply'd by the bodies of young lads and maidens, not exceeding  
fourteen years of age, nor under twelve; so great a number of  
both sexes in every country being now ready to starve for want of  
work and service: And these to be disposed of by their parents if  
alive, or otherwise by their nearest relations. But with due  
deference to so excellent a friend, and so deserving a patriot, I  
cannot be altogether in his sentiments; for as to the males, my  
American acquaintance assured me from frequent experience, that  
their flesh was generally tough and lean, like that of our  
school-boys, by continual exercise, and their taste disagreeable,  
and to fatten them would not answer the charge. Then as to the  
females, it would, I think, with humble submission, be a loss to  
the publick, because they soon would become breeders themselves:  
And besides, it is not improbable that some scrupulous people  
might be apt to censure such a practice, (although indeed very  
unjustly) as a little bordering upon cruelty, which, I confess,  
hath always been with me the strongest objection against any  
project, how well soever intended.  
  
But in order to justify my friend, he confessed, that this  
expedient was put into his head by the famous Salmanaazor, a  
native of the island Formosa, who came from thence to London,  
above twenty years ago, and in conversation told my friend, that  
in his country, when any young person happened to be put to  
death, the executioner sold the carcass to persons of quality, as  
a prime dainty; and that, in his time, the body of a plump girl  
of fifteen, who was crucified for an attempt to poison the  
Emperor, was sold to his imperial majesty's prime minister of  
state, and other great mandarins of the court in joints from the  
gibbet, at four hundred crowns. Neither indeed can I deny, that  
if the same use were made of several plump young girls in this  
town, who without one single groat to their fortunes, cannot stir  
abroad without a chair, and appear at a play-house and assemblies  
in foreign fineries which they never will pay for; the kingdom  
would not be the worse.  
  
Some persons of a desponding spirit are in great concern about  
that vast number of poor people, who are aged, diseased, or  
maimed; and I have been desired to employ my thoughts what course  
may be taken, to ease the nation of so grievous an incumbrance.  
But I am not in the least pain upon that matter, because it is  
very well known, that they are every day dying, and rotting, by  
cold and famine, and filth, and vermin, as fast as can be  
reasonably expected. And as to the young labourers, they are now  
in almost as hopeful a condition. They cannot get work, and  
consequently pine away from want of nourishment, to a degree,  
that if at any time they are accidentally hired to common labour,  
they have not strength to perform it, and thus the country and  
themselves are happily delivered from the evils to come.  
  
I have too long digressed, and therefore shall return to my  
subject. I think the advantages by the proposal which I have made  
are obvious and many, as well as of the highest importance.  
  
For first, as I have already observed, it would greatly lessen  
the number of Papists, with whom we are yearly over-run, being  
the principal breeders of the nation, as well as our most  
dangerous enemies, and who stay at home on purpose with a design  
to deliver the kingdom to the Pretender, hoping to take their  
advantage by the absence of so many good Protestants, who have  
chosen rather to leave their country, than stay at home and pay  
tithes against their conscience to an episcopal curate.  
  
Secondly, The poorer tenants will have something valuable of  
their own, which by law may be made liable to a distress, and  
help to pay their landlord's rent, their corn and cattle being  
already seized, and money a thing unknown.  
  
Thirdly, Whereas the maintainance of an hundred thousand  
children, from two years old, and upwards, cannot be computed at  
less than ten shillings a piece per annum, the nation's stock  
will be thereby encreased fifty thousand pounds per annum,  
besides the profit of a new dish, introduced to the tables of all  
gentlemen of fortune in the kingdom, who have any refinement in  
taste. And the money will circulate among our selves, the goods  
being entirely of our own growth and manufacture.  
  
Fourthly, The constant breeders, besides the gain of eight  
shillings sterling per annum by the sale of their children, will  
be rid of the charge of maintaining them after the first year.  
  
Fifthly, This food would likewise bring great custom to taverns,  
where the vintners will certainly be so prudent as to procure the  
best receipts for dressing it to perfection; and consequently  
have their houses frequented by all the fine gentlemen, who  
justly value themselves upon their knowledge in good eating; and  
a skilful cook, who understands how to oblige his guests, will  
contrive to make it as expensive as they please.  
  
Sixthly, This would be a great inducement to marriage, which all  
wise nations have either encouraged by rewards, or enforced by  
laws and penalties. It would encrease the care and tenderness of  
mothers towards their children, when they were sure of a  
settlement for life to the poor babes, provided in some sort by  
the publick, to their annual profit instead of expence. We should  
soon see an honest emulation among the married women, which of  
them could bring the fattest child to the market. Men would  
become as fond of their wives, during the time of their  
pregnancy, as they are now of their mares in foal, their cows in  
calf, or sow when they are ready to farrow; nor offer to beat or  
kick them (as is too frequent a practice) for fear of a  
miscarriage.  
  
Many other advantages might be enumerated. For instance, the  
addition of some thousand carcasses in our exportation of  
barrel'd beef: the propagation of swine's flesh, and improvement  
in the art of making good bacon, so much wanted among us by the  
great destruction of pigs, too frequent at our tables; which are  
no way comparable in taste or magnificence to a well grown, fat  
yearly child, which roasted whole will make a considerable figure  
at a Lord Mayor's feast, or any other publick entertainment. But  
this, and many others, I omit, being studious of brevity.  
  
Supposing that one thousand families in this city, would be  
constant customers for infants flesh, besides others who might  
have it at merry meetings, particularly at weddings and  
christenings, I compute that Dublin would take off annually about  
twenty thousand carcasses; and the rest of the kingdom (where  
probably they will be sold somewhat cheaper) the remaining eighty  
thousand.  
  
I can think of no one objection, that will possibly be raised  
against this proposal, unless it should be urged, that the number  
of people will be thereby much lessened in the kingdom. This I  
freely own, and 'twas indeed one principal design in offering it  
to the world. I desire the reader will observe, that I calculate  
my remedy for this one individual Kingdom of Ireland, and for no  
other that ever was, is, or, I think, ever can be upon Earth.  
Therefore let no man talk to me of other expedients: Of taxing  
our absentees at five shillings a pound: Of using neither  
cloaths, nor houshold furniture, except what is of our own growth  
and manufacture: Of utterly rejecting the materials and  
instruments that promote foreign luxury: Of curing the  
expensiveness of pride, vanity, idleness, and gaming in our  
women: Of introducing a vein of parsimony, prudence and  
temperance: Of learning to love our country, wherein we differ  
even from Laplanders, and the inhabitants of Topinamboo: Of  
quitting our animosities and factions, nor acting any longer like  
the Jews, who were murdering one another at the very moment their  
city was taken: Of being a little cautious not to sell our  
country and consciences for nothing: Of teaching landlords to  
have at least one degree of mercy towards their tenants. Lastly,  
of putting a spirit of honesty, industry, and skill into our  
shop-keepers, who, if a resolution could now be taken to buy only  
our native goods, would immediately unite to cheat and exact upon  
us in the price, the measure, and the goodness, nor could ever  
yet be brought to make one fair proposal of just dealing, though  
often and earnestly invited to it.  
  
Therefore I repeat, let no man talk to me of these and the like  
expedients, 'till he hath at least some glympse of hope, that  
there will ever be some hearty and sincere attempt to put them  
into practice.  
  
But, as to my self, having been wearied out for many years with  
offering vain, idle, visionary thoughts, and at length utterly  
despairing of success, I fortunately fell upon this proposal,  
which, as it is wholly new, so it hath something solid and real,  
of no expence and little trouble, full in our own power, and  
whereby we can incur no danger in disobliging England. For this  
kind of commodity will not bear exportation, and flesh being of  
too tender a consistence, to admit a long continuance in salt,  
although perhaps I could name a country, which would be glad to  
eat up our whole nation without it.  
  
After all, I am not so violently bent upon my own opinion, as to  
reject any offer, proposed by wise men, which shall be found  
equally innocent, cheap, easy, and effectual. But before  
something of that kind shall be advanced in contradiction to my  
scheme, and offering a better, I desire the author or authors  
will be pleased maturely to consider two points. First, As things  
now stand, how they will be able to find food and raiment for a  
hundred thousand useless mouths and backs. And secondly, There  
being a round million of creatures in humane figure throughout  
this kingdom, whose whole subsistence put into a common stock,  
would leave them in debt two million of pounds sterling, adding  
those who are beggars by profession, to the bulk of farmers,  
cottagers and labourers, with their wives and children, who are  
beggars in effect; I desire those politicians who dislike my  
overture, and may perhaps be so bold to attempt an answer, that  
they will first ask the parents of these mortals, whether they  
would not at this day think it a great happiness to have been  
sold for food at a year old, in the manner I prescribe, and  
thereby have avoided such a perpetual scene of misfortunes, as  
they have since gone through, by the oppression of landlords, the  
impossibility of paying rent without money or trade, the want of  
common sustenance, with neither house nor cloaths to cover them  
from the inclemencies of the weather, and the most inevitable  
prospect of intailing the like, or greater miseries, upon their  
breed for ever.  
  
I profess, in the sincerity of my heart, that I have not the  
least personal interest in endeavouring to promote this necessary  
work, having no other motive than the publick good of my country,  
by advancing our trade, providing for infants, relieving the  
poor, and giving some pleasure to the rich. I have no children,  
by which I can propose to get a single penny; the youngest being  
nine years old, and my wife past child-bearing.